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ABSTRACT

Residential instructional faculty in various disciplines report similar types of stressors in national and international studies. To determine whether this pattern holds for librarians, department chairs, cooperative extension faculty and others, a survey was conducted of the sources of stress across all faculty classifications in one university. A total of 1807 surveys was mailed, and after a second mailing, a response rate of 70% was achieved. Although each faculty group was found to have a distinct pattern of sources of stress, certain stressors were found to be common to all faculty. Most concerned either time or resource constraints: insufficient time to keep abreast of current events or to do what was expected in the job, or insufficient salaries and difficulties in securing financial support. Suggestions are made for training in time management techniques and a focus on a problem-solving approach to cope with financial stresses. Contains 11 references. (KM)

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TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE VIEW OF FACULTY STRESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION*

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ABSTRACT

Residential instructional faculty (RIF) from different disciplinary backgrounds in both national and international studies report similar types of stressors. However, given the diversity of roles and responsibilities of other faculty, does this pattern hold for librarians, department chairs, cooperative extension faculty and others? This study investigated the sources of stress across all faculty classifications in one comprehensive university (N=1807), and compared them to national and international studies. Although each faculty group was found to have a distinct pattern of sources of stress, certain stressors were found to be common to all faculty: the majority related either to time or resource constraints. Suggestions are made for dealing creatively with such causes of faculty stress.

TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE VIEW OF FACULTY STRESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Recent studies of college faculty around the world reveal dissatisfaction with work environments, disillusionment with career decisions, and incidences of stress emanating from various aspects of their professional roles. The decade of the 80's is producing a generation of professors attempting to cope with surprisingly high levels of stress (Seldin, 1987). In American universities more than half of the faculty are actively seeking positions in other institutions, and nearly one third are considering changing careers (Bowen and Schuster, 1986). Stress appears to play the dual role of adding impetus to the exodus from academe and contributing to incidences of physical and mental ailments.

Irrespective of the discipline and the institutional setting, similarities have been found in the stressors experienced by college and university faculty members. A comparison of sources and patterns of occupational stress reported by Israeli university faculty (Keinan and Perlberg, 1987) and American counterparts (Gmelch, Lovrich and Wilke, 1984; 1986), revealed a similar ranking of the major sources of stress.

Previous studies, however, have been limited to residential instructional faculty (RIF) and have not considered other types of faculty such as extension, library, students services, department chairs, and academic administrators. While residential faculty represent the majority of faculty positions in most colleges and universities, one might question whether their experience of stress can be extrapolated to other faculty positions.

OBJECTIVES

Given the previous interest in the area of faculty stress, and the limits to which one can generalize to an entire educational community within any given institution, the present study sought to expand the scope of previous work by investigating the stresses across all classifications of faculty. The objectives were:

1. to develop an instrument capable of assessing faculty stress from a variety of faculty positions and perspectives;

2. to identify the sources of faculty stress for seven classifications of faculty: residential instructional faculty, library faculty, student services faculty, cooperative extension faculty, academic administrators, department chairs, and faculty in non-academic assignments;

3. to compare the sources of stress across all classifications with established national norms; and

4. to consider implications for faculty development, administrative training, institutional interventions, and university-wide programs which might assist faculty to cope productively with stress.

METHODOLOGY

The Faculty Stress Index developed in the National Faculty Stress Project (Gmelch, Lovrich and Wilke, 1984), and utilized in other countries (Kienan and Perlberg, 1987), was adapted and expanded for this study to create the Comprehensive Faculty Stress Index (CFSI) which included all faculty classifications, not just residential instructional faculty.

In order to ensure that all potentially relevant facets of job-related strain would be explored, the development of the new instrument followed the same procedures used to develop and validate the FSI (See Gmelch, et al., 1984). To accommodate the population of faculty serving as academic administrators, appropriate items from the Administrative Stress Index (Gmelch, 1982) were included. In addition, 60 faculty (10 from each of the additional faculty classifications) were asked to keep stress logs for a period of two weeks. They were asked to indicate on a daily basis the most stressful single event, the most stressful series of events and, at the end of each week, report other common stressors that normally occur but had not occurred during that particular week. These diaries were content-analyzed, and items which were frequently mentioned, or which were regarded as particularly stressful, were included in the 60 item version of the CFSI. Like the original FSI, a five-point Likert-type scale was used, ranging from slightly stressful (1), through moderately stressful (3), to excessively stressful (5). Finally, sections were added to

the CFSI to assess demographic variables, coping techniques, health patterns, and personality traits.

An American land-grant, comprehensive university was identified as the site for the study. In Spring 1987, 1807 instruments were mailed to all faculty classifications in the university. After a second mailing, a final response rate of 70 percent was achieved.

RESULTS

The preliminary results of the top ten faculty stressors for each classification are reported in Table I. For comparative purposes the norms established for residential instructional faculty from the National Faculty Stress Project are included in Column I. An item was established as being stressful only if it was checked as a "4" or "5" on the five-point scale, representing "highly" or "excessively" stressful respectively.

In analyzing the results of the survey, two comparisons were possible. On the one hand, different categories of respondents could be compared with each other and, on the other hand, results of different groups could be compared with the national norms, where there were comparable items.

Overall, all groups identified two stressful factors among their top ten: "having insufficient time to keep abreast of current developments in my field," and "feeling that I have too heavy a work load, one that I cannot finish during the normal work day." Although this is an interesting finding, it is hardly surprising; the virtually limitless nature of academic work being one of the identifying characteristics of academic life everywhere.

Of greater interest were the differences amongst the various categories of faculty respondents. For example, "having insufficient time to keep abreast of current developments in my field" was ranked as the highest stressor for RIF, as the third highest for non-academic faculty group, and as fifth highest for academic administrators. Turning to the response patterns of individual categories of faculty members, predictably those of RIF were most similar to the national norms. In both the National and the Institutional studies, both groups reported the following five items, although not in the same order;

Table 1
UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE FACULTY STRESS: A COMPARISON BY FACULTY CLASSIFICATION AND NATIONAL NORMS

Item Description	National N=1200		R.I. Faculty N=730		Dept. Chairs N=47		Academic Admin. N=31		Librarians N=32		Student Services N=63		Co-op. Ed. N=184		Non-Academic N=124	
	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%
Participating in work-related activities outside regular working hours									5.5	50	8.5	39.7	6	46.7		
Dealing with departmental and university rules and regulations					7	48.8										
Having inadequate facilities (e.g., office, library, laboratories)			8.5	39.4	5	50			5.5	50	4	49.2			8	33.3
Making presentations at professional conferences and meetings							3.5	54.8								
Imposing excessively high self expectations	1	53	2	49.7							5	46.8	3	45.6	1	47.6
Receiving inadequate university recognition for service activities			6	41.3							8.5	39.7				
Having insufficient time to keep abreast of current developments in my field	3	49	1	56.1	1	69.1	5	51.6	5.5	50	2	53.9	1	62.3	3	37.4
Believing that the progress in my career is not what it should or could be	8	34														
Being interrupted frequently (e.g., telephone calls and drop-in visitors)	9.5	33					9.5	45.1			9.5	38.1	2	50	5.5	35.5
Securing financial support for my research	7	80	3	47.8	9	42.5										
Being asked to engage in service activities							1	64.6								
Preparing a manuscript for publication (or preparing for a performance/exhibit)	5.5	40	8.5	38.4					9	48.9						
Having insufficient or inadequately trained support staff															10	33.1
Writing letters and memos, and responding to other paperwork											9.5	38.1	10	36.5		
Having insufficient time for service activities							6.5	48.4								
Feeling that I have too heavy a work load, one that I cannot finish during normal work day	5.5	40	5	44.6	4	57.5	3.5	54.8	1	62.5	3	50.7	3	49.2	2	41.7
Attending meetings which take up too much time	9.5	33			8	45	9.5	45.1	7	56.3	7	41.3	9	40.8	7	33.9
Seeking compatability among institutional, departmental, and personal goals					10	41.3			9	48.9						
Receiving inadequate salary to meet financial needs	4	41	4	45.8					3	53.1	1	55.5	8	41.0	9	32.0
Having job demands which interfere with other personal (family, recreation, and other interest)	7	35	10	38.8	8	44.3			5.5	50	6	45.9	4	48.1	5.5	35.5
Supervising and coordinating the tasks of many people							8	45.7								
Having to make decisions that affect the lives of individuals that I know (colleagues, staff members, students)							7	58.1								
Trying to gain financial support for programs			7	40.1	7	43.7	6.5	48.4							4	34.8
Trying to complete reports and other paperwork on time					5	43.8			9	48.9			5	47.8		

NOTE: Percentages represent the combination of positions 4 and 5 on a five-point continuum ranging from 1 = "slight concern" to 5 = "excessive concern."

1. "imposing excessively high self-expectations;"
2. "securing financial support for my research;"
3. "having insufficient time to keep abreast of current developments in my field;"
4. "receiving inadequate salary to meet financial needs;" and
5. "feeling that I have too heavy a work load, one that I cannot finish during a normal work day."

In addition, instructional faculty in the target institution and the comparable national study identified among their top ten stressors those items related to preparation of publications and integrating work with other interests.

Librarians reported six causes of stress identical to those of the national study, however, their top two were "feeling I have too heavy a workload" (ranked fifth in the national study) and "attending meetings which take up too much time" (not in the national top ten).

Cooperative extension faculty shared five of their top items with residential faculty. One dissimilarity was their second most common cause of stress ("being interrupted frequently"), which was not found in the national study top cluster.

Student services faculty and instructional faculty were similar on seven items but the former's highest stress level arose from "receiving inadequate salary to meet financial needs" (ranked fourth by national study). For their part, faculty in non-academic assignments expressed the most stress from "imposing excessively high self-expectations," identical to the national study.

Those ranked as academic administrators (deans, directors, heads of research institutes, etc.) identified as their top three stressors items which were not even ranked in the top ten by other classifications: (1) "being asked to engage in service activities;" (2) "having to make decisions that affect lives of individuals I know;" and (3) "making presentations at professional conferences and meetings."

Finally, the Departmental Chairs tended to combine stress elements which affect both teaching and administrative faculty, perhaps because of their elected positions and their dual academic and management roles. Overall, they reported the highest incidence of "high to excessive" stress (68.1 percent). They also identified one source of stress which was

unique to them: "dealing with departmental and university regulations." While this was dissimilar to other higher education faculty, it has been identified as the most stressful aspect of the job in many studies on elementary and secondary school administrators (Brimm, 1983; Gmelch and Swent, 1984). They were also pressured by the need for timely completion of reports and paperwork.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Although each faculty group had a distinct pattern of sources of stress, certain stressors were found to be common to all faculty groups. The majority related either to time or resource constraints--insufficient time to keep abreast of current events or to do what was expected in the job, or insufficient salaries, difficulties in securing financial support, and so on.

Despite the fact that stress intervention programs which work well in one occupation are not always successful in others (Caplan, et al., 1975), since professors experience similar types of stress, similar stress management strategies may be applicable across campuses.

Clearly, time constraints may be within the control of faculty -- and stress could be reduced with training in time management techniques (Gmelch, 1987). On the subject of resource constraints, while it may be more difficult to directly impact salaries and financial support in such difficult economic times, the manner in which people view and handle these situations could be dealt with more creatively. Instead of regarding lack of funds as a source of potential conflict and aggravation, members of faculty could be encouraged to focus not on "soft" or "hard" negotiation tactics, but rather on becoming "problem-solvers," seeking wise outcomes efficiently and amiably (Fisher and Ury, 1981).

The approach to reducing stress in difficult times rests both with professors' willingness to change and the institutions' responsiveness to faculty needs.

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